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CC:

Subject: Allentown Morning Call (1-14) Commentary: Is chocolate getting into your well?

Is chocolate getting into your well?

Paul Carpenter

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It is Michael Krancer to the rescue, plucking Pennsylvania from the clutches of those nasty feds who are scheming to harm our true-blue patriotic industrialists.

By true-blue industrialists, I mean the super-rich heroes of the gas drilling industry, largely from Texas, who have proven their virtue by giving Krancer's boss, Gov. Tom Corbett, a million bucks in so-called political campaign contributions.

According to The Associated Press, Krancer, who heads Corbett's Department of Environmental Protection, assailed the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for having only a "rudimentary" understanding of the environmental problems in the Susquehanna County village of Dimock.

It seems the EPA is sticking its nose into things that are none of its business — to wit, environmental horrors inflicted by gas drillers. In a letter to an EPA official, Krancer said that agency should "be guided by sound science and the law instead of emotion and publicity."

At issue is the sound science of Krancer's laissez-faire DEP, which let the Cabot Oil & Gas Corp., based in Texas (where else?) off the hook concerning its obligation to deliver fresh water to households in Dimock, where, according to a 2010 settlement with the state, drilling had fouled 18 residential water wells.

Instead of sound science, it seems the EPA is listening to a group of emotional scientists and health professionals who asked for "urgent action to protect the victims of hydraulic fracturing in Dimock."

In hydraulic fracturing, drillers take tons of water, load it with chemicals and blast it underground to break up rocks so they release gas. Much of the contaminated water gushes back to the surface, where DEP has let drillers dump it into treatment plants that cannot remove the toxins. Then it was simply released into waterways.

Other states require that it be put in deep underground reservoirs and that drillers pay a steep "severance tax" on the gas they extract. Pennsylvania is the only gas-producing state that does neither. (Even Texas has such a tax, but Corbett instead wants tiny "impact fees.") And since he appointed Krancer, a lawyer from a super-rich Main Line family, to run the DEP, there have been news reports about all sorts of accommodations for the gas industry.

One of the most fascinating was a secret directive, forwarded to DEP staffers by Deputy Secretary John Hines, that henceforth no gas drilling company could be cited for violations of environmental rules unless the action was specifically cleared by DEP's top political operatives.

"Any waiver from this directive will not be acceptable," Hines told DEP inspectors in a memo, according to The Philadelphia Inquirer. This is tantamount to telling the state police they cannot give speeding tickets to any of the governor's pals unless the tickets are approved beforehand by some top dogs in Harrisburg.

Krancer said the directive was temporary. He also said he asked that gas drillers voluntarily stop dumping their contaminated water into streams and other parts of the environment by way of ineffective treatment plants, and they complied.

I asked DEP spokesman Kevin Sunday if the halt on toxic water dumping is still voluntary. "It's a call that the industry has agreed to," he said. I took that as a "yes."

I also asked about the directive ordering inspectors to get approval from top DEP political operatives before they cite gas

drillers for violations. Is it still in force?

Sunday sent me an eight-page DEP memo telling inspectors that "enforcement actions" must be reviewed by an "executive team" to ensure "statewide consistency when conducting site inspections at well sites." Again, I took that as a "yes."

Speaking of Krancer's views on how we should not let "emotion" play a role in how we regulate the gas drilling industry, The Morning Call had a story last April quoting him as saying, "I will not let them poison the water. We have to protect the water. But we have to do it on science and not emotion."

In that story, the governor offered an emotional defense of his decision not to allow a severance tax. "Should we put an extra tax on Hershey because they are making chocolate?" Corbett was quoted as saying. "I don't think that's American. We need to treat all businesses the same."

I asked Sunday if Krancer shares the governor's view that the environmental threats posed by hydraulic fracturing are the same as those posed by chocolate.

"It's not within the department's purview to comment on that," he said.

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Paul Carpenter's commentary appears Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

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